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Participating in the Knowledge Society

Text taken from a Keynote speech from the UK Systems Society Conference. Hull. September 11th – 12th 2014.

Introduction

This paper will wander a little but I hope retain order to the core theme – “Participating in the Knowledge Society”.

I wanted to start with an image which might arrest your attention, a wire weave sculpture by the artist Linda Johns (<http://www.lindajohns.com/sculpture/sculpture-weaves.htm>) . The sculpture is two thirds life sized and made of copper wire. I like it – I liked it so much I bought it. I like it because I know human life is precious and this sculpture helps me to think about the ephemerality of people. What Gilbert Ryle labelled and Arthur Koestler immortalised as “ghosts in the machine” (Koestler, 1967).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Ryle was responding to Descarte but Koester was pondering on human self destruction. Ryle takes me to Koestler and Koestler to more recent and more optimistic views of human society.

The theme of my paper is – to mis-quote Stephen Pinker quoting Charles Dickens – about ‘Our Better Angels’ (Pinker, 2011)– in a roundabout kind of way. Ghosts and Angels – inspired by this sculpture. What I am trying to address is the complexity of human nature and, linked to this, the tendency of many systemisists to simplify this nature in order to make a more complex whole more addressable. This can be the cause of problems.

Back to the sculpture and my inspiration, I like Art because it perturbs my thinking ... and I find I think at my best when I am perturbed. I like it because it encourages me to believe that art can help us all to think.

The theme of my paper is the Knowledge Society (KS) ... and, more specifically Participating in the knowledge society – that is (long hand) human beings participating with each other and their environment in a society where knowledge is valued. But is the KS a real and viable term? It is a self evident truth that society has changed dynamically over the last 2000 years. It is also true that the nature of change is contested and terms like the KS are often seen to be historical false trails or over-claims or mis-claims.

History is littered with such good and powerful but false trails. Two I find particularly intriguing are the Merwin-Marie Snell's designs for a "Parliament of Religions" in and around the time of the founding of the League of Nations in 1920, and Michael Traber's thoughts about what he called the 'Myth of the Information Revolution' in 1986 (Traber, 1986).

The KS may be found on reflection to be another false step. But, maybe not.

I do think that the future is an optimistic country to visit and I tend to agree with Stephen Pinker when he talks about "our better angels" and the positive spin he takes and applies. According to Pinker, on almost every level, on a global scale and in broad brush strokes we as a species are improving in almost every way. We are more prone to empathy, more prone to listen and learn, more prone to reason and consider prior to act.

Daniel Kahneman in 'Thinking fast and slow' (Kahneman, 2011) talks about our predilection to think with what he calls 'system 1' our senses and instinct rather than 'system 2' our reason and rational faculty. But he also has good news about the tendency which is that there is a trend for us to think better, slower but better.

On the darker side, I am also struck by Hanah Arendt's glorious if disturbing study in 'The origins of totalitarianism' (Arendt, 1950). In her foundational book Arendt demonstrates that human progress and slow, deliberate thinking can result in some appalling outcomes such as those of the Gulag and the Holocaust. Even very slow and very deliberate thinking can result in horrendous encounters with our worst nightmares. This brings me to the idea of 'Doing the wrong thing well'. As many of you will all know Ackoff suggested (as quoted in the *Wall Street Journal* 11/11/09): "The more efficient you are at doing the wrong thing, the wronger you become. It is much better to do the right thing wronger than the wrong thing righter! If you do the right thing wrong and correct it, you get better!"

Arendt's message is that totalitarian regimes are brilliant at the efficiency of doing. They are terrible at the rightness of doing.

The knowledge society is not 'right' because it contains efficiencies. Rather, it will be proved right by history if it led to a sustained and clearly causally related improvement in the results of our actions.

Pondering on Ackoff, the knowledge society may be a 'right thing' and we may be doing it righter and righter all the time. But, before we get carried away with our cleverness, we need to question. Is the knowledge society right? And, are we doing it

righter and righter? We cannot assume either ... I want to think about this with you. I want to relate to you my journey on this ... with a couple of examples. And I want to share my concerns and worries.

My four themes are:

Firstly. What is it to participate in the knowledge society?

Secondly. My academic experience with KS ideas in a variety of areas: the project Coastal Area Management Programme (CAMP) Almeria, the Cultural Value (CV) project and the Infinite Bandwidth, Zero Latency (IBZL) project. I will discuss these with relation to the Imagine method.

Thirdly. I will generalise a little about systems and knowledge.

Fourthly. I will discuss the essential requirement to question – especially people like me, the established mindset – in order to achieve renewal.

What is it to participate in the Knowledge Society?

If participating in the KS is important we need to at least be clear on use of terms.

What is the KS? We will have spent a lot of time already thinking about this and I do not want to stir a pot which may be spinning crazily already but I do need to be clear in my own head. There are lots of definitions. Here is one taken at random off the web. It is from an article by Afgan and Carvallo (Afgan & Carvallo, 2010). They describe the KS: “as a human structured organisation based on contemporary developed knowledge and representing new quality of life support systems. It (*the KS*) implies the need for a full understanding of distribution of knowledge, access to information and the capability to transfer information into a knowledge.” The key themes of the definition are that the KS is based on contemporary knowledge and comes with *new quality life support systems*. I like this definition because it is not easy and needs thinking about.

KS is not just society fundamentally based on knowledge. It implies a support system of knowledge, knowledge supporting human life. Hang onto that concept I will return to it towards the end of this paper.

OK, so that is KS but who is participating? If knowledge is a good thing then clearly we all should be. But, remember Arendt and Totalitarianism. Slower and more deliberate rationalism may not lead to glorious participation. If the KS is like one of its famous predecessors; Industrial Society then it will encompass all and take no prisoners. But there are grades of participation and engagement. This can be thought of from a number of ideological positions. For example:

- i. Those who own the means of Knowledge production and those who own nothing other than a potential to buy (possibly a Marxist interpretation).
- ii. Or, the trade of knowledge in a benign and free market (more of a Classical Economics interpretation),
- iii. Or, knowledge as a common right and a resource open to all according to need (a socialist interpretation?).
- iv. Or, knowledge as a technical product available by diverse means (which we don't know or care about so long as we have them) and at diverse costs (which we also don't know about and only care if we cannot afford them) - a technical/ mechanistic interpretation

Much of the reading I have done on the KS seems to me to represent what I would call a naïve, mechanistic and utopian view of the KS. I simplify it as follows:

“society based on a technical product, available at a cost which we can affect by market forces and if not who cares, we can always find another way”.

J R Hennessy writing in the Guardian on the 22nd July 2014 – took on the utopian, technical future. He said: “The backlash against this world is democracy manifesting itself; a tacit rejection of the ideological assumptions underpinning the personal tech revolution. People want to define the structure of their own lives, and Silicon Valley's myriad product lines are an unwelcome intrusion into the way we live and interact with one another – and even the way we eat, sleep and procreate. A simple fact remains: there is something intrinsically repellant about a world in which our food, jobs and personal relationships are replaced by digital proxies in the name of ultra-efficient disruption. The geeks, with their ready willingness to abandon social norms, are pulling us toward a utopia nobody wants.”.

Whatever the ideology, KS implies levels of engagement and levels of commitment and control.

Problems emerge from any ideology: Problems like:

- i. Non-participation (most obviously)
 - ii. Learned helplessness in a knowledge underclass?
 - iii. Elite and privileged knowledge
 - iv. The tyranny of metrics and
 - v. The ownership of the means of metrics production and interpretation
- and many more.

There is clearly a systemic relation between the ideology and kinds of resulting problems. But, who should be participating in the KS? My understanding supported by my experience is that if we leave participation to chance we have no chance. Participation needs to be planned just as thoughtfully as Jefferson planned the Declaration of Independence of the 13 American Colonies. Jefferson believed that, if he left it to chance the USA would end up with Hamilton's Federalism and maybe a Monarchy! There were plenty of powerful voices in the young proto-Republic calling for this.

Leaving it to chance is utopian and could lead to what Arendt might have called a Virtual Totalitarianism – Gulags of the Internet. Indeed much of the news about the work of internet giants, the NSA (US National Security Agency), the the UK government DRIP (Data Retentions and Investigatory Powers) legislation implies me to believe that planning by stealth in a KS leads to new and frightening potentials for Totalitarianism (I define totalitarianism as authority-control over social form). But I will not pursue that theme now.

Academic experience with KS ideas in a variety of areas

What I set out here is the background for my ideas. Set against this wider and disturbing thought world, my own small scale and local work with participation in the KS is the boundary condition of my paper and in this regard I want to talk about a systemic approach called Imagine. In particular, the application of Imagine in three projects ~ Infinite Band Width Zero Latency IBZL, Coastal Area Management Plan CAMP Almeria and the Cultural Values Model or CVM in the BBC World Service (BBCWS) and the British Council (BC). I have used Imagine – which I hold is a true methodology as it changes and learns with each iteration - to help me in my work with participation in many forms of the KS (S Bell, Correa Pena, & Prem, 2013). Imagine is a thought experiment methodology based on Rich Pictures.

It allows groups and communities to share knowledge and participate in meaningful change. I have used it largely face to face but have also applied it with students on an OU module in an asynchronous, virtual participatory approach. In IBZL we were seeking to help groups of people – IT specialists and lay people – to dream the internet future and come up with projects which might help these dreams to emerge because Alan Kay has observed: “the best way to predict the future is to invent it”. This attempt at participating in the KS was to consider the internet potential and to

engage groups of people in inventing it. For example to invent or avoid the next Facebook.

In CAMP Almeria we worked with communities around the municipality of Almeria in Andalucía in Spain and asked them to consider the sustainability of their region – past, present and future. We wanted them to dream the sustainable future but to make this real with real policy and action.

This attempt at participating in the KS was to help local community to gain autonomy of its own sustainability. This, it needs to be noted, was all happening in peak recession Spain (2010 – 2012). In the Cultural Values Model we worked with the BC and BBCWS in helping teams of stakeholders from within each organization, teams which were working on outreach and broadcast projects - to assess their work in terms of value rather than imposed performance or impact assessment. This attempt at participating in the KS was to provide BC and BBCWS communities with the potential for authority over the assessment and valuing of their work, their creativity and output.

In all cases groups and communities thought together. The usual thing. The sort of thing which we are all familiar with. Rooms with people tasked to do stuff and work towards goals .. The usual participatory stuff.

I am the main author of Imagine and am biased but I think it does offer some innovation which is not just ‘the usual stuff’. The Imagine approach was used as the ‘lite’ means to help groups to think. It is based upon the Kolbian idea (Kolb, 1984) of Reflecting, Connecting, Modelling and Doing. The facilitators follow this ‘natural’ conceptual gradient and I argue that it allows ideas to flow. Further, Imagine is ‘Task 1’ in a wider methodology called ‘Triple Task Methodology’ (Simon Bell & Morse, 2010). Tasks 2 and 3 allow the researcher to assess and understand the progress of the group. Imagine can be cyclic and it can be more fractal in experience (allowing the stages to branch out if they need to)

But we are clear in our need to plan to a conclusion of mutual understandings and possible actions. To some extent it is deterministic and rationalist but

If people want it can be anarchic, dysfunctional and conflictual.

I do not avoid conflict and dysfunction. As Koestler observed in ‘the act of creation’, sometimes when planes of thinking literally collide, creativity (often accompanied by joy) can emerge. Imagine wrapped inside Triple Task should result in the understandable emergence of outcomes usually and primarily as diagrams – Rich

Pictures (RPs). RPs are not easy or clear in interpretation but they allow for what Rose Armson has called: “optimal indiscretion”, on a good day anyway. And that is what I wanted. Spaces for ideas to come through the cracks in the mantle of convention. And we did produce real shared knowledge outcomes:

In the case of IBZL there were several technical outcomes but my favourite was the ‘Real Avatars’ project. The idea of a robotic device to represent someone unable to attend a face to face event.

In the case of CAMP Almeria we produced a local sustainability plan which gained the support of the Regional Government.

In the case of the BBCWS and BC we developed a Cultural Value model and a presentational device called a value constellation. The model was created to help teams to gain control over the value which they bring to their work and their organisation and to push back against more mechanistic performance and impact assessment.

Systems and Knowledge

I suggest that these are all outcomes of groups participating in the knowledge society. That is, working on my definition: “contemporary knowledge ... with new quality life support systems” – here shown in technology, strategy and assessment. But they are all very local and very specific pieces of participation in localized KS. A lot of effort for some very small returns. Can or should participation in KS be scaled up? If KS is to make a mark in history then surely it has to be scaled up.

Many large scale forms of mass participation in life support systems based on knowledge – like general elections for government – show steep declines in participation in many countries. Sure, we can have some small and localized success in participation but are these reclaiming inches against the miles already taken by inertia, cynicism and contempt with public forums?

Participation in the KS needs to address a number of issues IF participation in a KS of some sort is to be a valid and durable project. At large scale it seems to me that we suffer from a lack of ideas to promote wider and less cynical engagement. I have some thoughts about why we seem to lack really scalable models for improved participation.

Firstly. Inertia. Lazy thinking based on comfortable best practice

Secondly. Denuding processes which are labelled ‘innovative’ but are actually procedural and dull upgrades to existing comfortable best practice

Thirdly fear. A fear in decision making places of just about everything – fear of:

ideas

participation

expectation

decisions themselves

sustained engagement

accountability

Inertia, denuding processes and fear can only be confronted by practical intellectual fearlessness and trust in diversity, inclusion, confidence, action and the sustainability theme of our age. But fear is a major concern of mine and the subject of another book I am working on right now.

So, I conclude that the virtue of participation in the KS cannot be assumed.

Progress and change is dynamic and disturbing – a thing which quite rightly shakes the conceits of the established order. But, we could generalize and say that the only thing that has truly stopped changing is a dead thing. Here is the threat arising from inactivity. Systems approaches are valid and useful to us in our current challenge. In the systems community we have had the thrust of a holistic approach and seen the tangible gains from the last great innovation - the focus on ‘soft’ and the opening of and to management thinking. But, we have proceduralised and fermented around ‘best practice’. We have allowed slower and duller agencies to cast our good ideas in the intellectual concrete of ‘best practice’. This concretization is equivalent to perpetual death. Theory, Methodology and Practice need constant renewal in order to keep up with the paradigm expansion required for the realization of a benign KS. Tyranny, totalitarianism and concretization are never far away.

The Requirement to Question

Unlike our capacity to materially alter Climate Change, I do not think that we are past the tipping point for participation in KS and I think we still have choices to make in how we would like to see the KS evolve. Choices between allowing the dominance of Ghosts in the Machine or our Better Angels. Resilient participation has been part of the background to my work with KS and maybe it may be the incentive to renew innovation in systems? But, more likely innovation will be divergent from the previous innovation of ‘soft’ – an innovation in terms of point of focus and the legitimate and effective scope of systems. Here are some ideas. The innovation maybe linked to one or all of the following three ideas:

Firstly. The ideological – providing systemic means to truly engage with the worldviews of different ideological stances and how they effect the emerging KS. We need to grasp the inner natures of fundamentalisms and intellectual oubliettes as well as management practice. Since the victory of capitalism and Francis Fukuyama’s announcement of the “end of history”, ideology may not be cool but it is still out there and I argue it is still in charge. As Anthony Hopkins says of the Devil in the movie: The Rite: “you may not believe in the devil but he believes in you” – we may not believe in ideology, but ideology is still a great power in our world and it messes with us and our plans daily. If we do not address ideological questions then the KS may well evolve as a tyranny.

Secondly. The collective – providing really sophisticated ways to help social application of systems approaches and deriving results which represent Surowiecki’s ‘wisdom of crowds’ (Surowiecki, 2005). The internet unbound offers us potential in this regard and great if troubling outcomes have already been achieved in civil societies across the globe ... but we catch our breath and wait to see what comes next.

Thirdly. The truly Agile – providing means for groups to co-develop, rapidly and fearlessly, ideas and processes which, whilst lacking the considered depth of project-order thinking, retain the contemporary and closeness of fit to real world issues which so many modelled responses lack.

There are many other possible avenues for systems thinkers to pursue and I believe that resilient participation in the KS is only achievable by such innovative and deliberate acts of collective will. Fundamentally we have great need to apply our participation with each other as means to amplify our individual efforts.

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Figure 1. Wire Sculpture

